

## Teacher Perception and Practice of Teaching English Writing in the Secondary Schools of Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** *Writing is considered as a critical skill to be achieved in English classes of secondary level education in Bangladesh. This skill is important for its implications in the high-stakes external examinations and in students' academic life beyond that. However, recent studies show that majority of the students in Bangladesh struggle to write properly even after spending a significant amount of time in activities related to writing. This raises concerns regarding the methods of teaching writing. This study explores teachers' perceptions and practices of teaching writing in secondary schools of Bangladesh. Data was collected from 136 English teachers purposively selected from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Three different methods of data collection were employed. All the teachers responded to a questionnaire. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selected group (14 teachers) of them. Furthermore, six classroom observations were conducted in classes of teachers from the same group to elicit additional evidence on their actual practices. Findings from the study reveal some incongruity between perception and practice of teaching writing. For example though teachers said in the interview that they practice group-writing activity, it was not observed in their classroom practices as students were found to be writing individually while sitting in a group. Similarly, their comment about learning creative writing skills through practices was hardly reflected in their classroom where students had almost no opportunity for free writing. Overall findings from this study have the potential of helping in teachers' professional development so they can teach writing effectively.*

**Key Words:** *Perception, practice, English writing, secondary*

## 1. Background

In the age of globalization, writing has become an indispensable skill for individuals. Ferede (2013) suggests that, students' language is largely evaluated by their ability to write down their thought on paper. It is often suggested that the writing skill is getting renewed focus due to its importance in different industry including education and research (Ortiz 2013). However, studies show that graduates often lack critical skills of process writing which is essential for professional and academic context of writing (Communicaid, 2010; Driscoll, 2011; Ortiz, 2013). Considering the fast moving global and national context, National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) of Bangladesh has put considerable emphasis on writing along with the other language skills in order to increase the professional skills of the people but also turn them into skilled human resource.

The importance of writing can be understood from the score distribution of Bangladesh's most important recruitment exam i.e. the Bangladesh Cadre Service (BCS) examination. Out of a total of 1300 marks 900 is allocated for writing on different subjects (BPSC 2014). Similarly, in the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination, out of 200 marks (in English) half is allocated only for writing tasks which includes writing paragraphs, essays, letters, dialogues, and reports etc (NCTB 2012). As such, students are expected to be proficient in well organized and coherent writing by the time they complete their secondary education.

However, the practical situation is far different from the demands made. Researchers have found that students often do not achieve the desired proficiency in writing due to the lack of effective ways of teaching writing and due to non-use of English outside the classroom. Hoque (1999) appropriately remarks- "Despite the considerable amount of time devoted to English instruction, the general proficiency and achievement of the majority of the students graduating from high schools is unsatisfactory and disproportionately low" (p.93). Similar views were posited by Uddin (2014) that even at the tertiary level, where English is the medium of instruction, students' proficiency level of English is very low. The Ministry of Education commissioned a English Language Teaching taskforce which reported that the language proficiency of secondary school students is much lower than assumed in their textbook (Hamid & Baldauf: 2008). Though the teachers are not fully responsible for the low proficiency, their teaching – learning practices are questioned due to this.

For teaching effectively the teachers need to understand what and how to teach and perception of teachers is immensely important for this understanding. Hardy and Hays (1979) commented that teachers' perception system helps them to filter required information from their previous experience which they have acquired from their surrounding environment. Which means teachers' perception helps them to sort, analyze and integrate information as per the need of the situation (Richardson 1996; Smith 2001). Another study (Diene, 1993) suggests that teachers

practice and belief are embedded within a broader context. In fact, it is often commented that perception and belief are related concepts which influence teaching practices (Smith 2001).

Brooks and Brooks (1999) indicated that social factors play an important role in shaping perception and knowledge and the way of teaching and interaction with the students is entirely dependent on the perception of the teachers. Thus teachers' perception has direct influence on the students' learning (Newman, 2009). Similarly, Beijaard (2003) portrayed a close relation between teachers' perception and their efficacy in teaching practice, suggesting teachers' classroom practice is deeply influenced by their perception.

It can be observed that the English proficiency of the Bangladeshi students is very low which is connected with current teaching learning practices. The status-quo can only be changed with the adaptation of an appropriate and effective teaching method by the teachers. Therefore, understanding teachers' perception is important as their decisions originate from it (Clark & Yinger, 1979). It is crucial for teaching writing to explore the perception of teachers and their practices in the classroom. A thorough understanding has the potential of contributing in designing an effective method for teaching writing.

Considering the factors discussed above, this study aims to explore teachers' perceptions and practices of teaching *writing* in secondary schools of Bangladesh.

## **2. Methodology:**

With the advancement of educational research, a number of methods have been developed which are fit for different research aims. With a view of exploring teachers' perceptions and practices about teaching writing, this study employed a mixed method research design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Barcelos (2003) and Borg (2003) state that mixed approach of research on teacher cognition might reveal multi-dimensional thought process of teachers towards particular behavior, concepts or actions which one particular method might be unable to produce. Therefore a combination of quantitative and qualitative method (Dornyei, 2003) is effective to get a deeper and broader insight into teacher cognition and thought process.

Three different methods of data collection, namely questionnaire, one-to-one in-depth interview and classroom observation were employed. According to Brown (2001) questionnaire is a tool that contains questions or statements. These questions and statements can be both open ended or close ended. Dornyei (2003) however advocates the efficiency of the close ended question or statement as they are less likely to be skipped and therefore can save a lot of researchers' time, effort and money. Moreover this can be used in diverse situations due to its versatility. Considering these factors, a close ended questionnaire was adopted from Ferde (2013) and was modified according to Bangladesh's teaching-learning context.

The questionnaire had statements about teachers' perception about teaching writing skill. A Likert-type scale was used to rate the perception of the teachers which ranged from 1 to 5, where 1 reflects to strong disagreement and 5 refers to strong agreement with the statement. Data was collected from 136 English teachers selected purposively from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. The questionnaires were sent to 140 teachers with an equal distribution of 20 in each of the seven divisions of Bangladesh. Out of 140, 136 responded.

Apart from the individual questionnaire in-depth one-to-one interviews were conducted to collect information directly from the respondents. Merriam (2001) considered individual interviews as a very useful tool for situations where information such as feelings and emotions (which are also part of teachers' beliefs, perceptions and opinions) that cannot be observed needs to be collected. In this study, a semi-structured interview was designed to obtain information from 14 randomly selected teachers from the initial sample who conveyed their thoughts and perceptions about writing skill.

According to Merriam (2001) observation can be used as a research tool if it serves the purpose of the research, is planned purposefully, if it is recorded methodically, and if it is subjected to checks and controls on validity and reliability. In addition to questionnaire and in-depth interviews six classroom observations were conducted in classes taken by randomly selected teachers from the same group. These observations aimed to elicit additional evidence on their actual classroom practices.

With a view to get a clear idea about the teacher perception and practice of writing skill all the data collection tools focused on five broad areas. These are: teachers' perception and practice of the nature of writing, teaching language forms in writing lessons, their approach of teaching writing and providing feedback, writing strategy and preferred activity for writing tasks.

Quantitative data collected through questionnaires were analyzed by descriptive statistics whereas qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were analyzed thematically. After that, findings from these three tools were brought together for triangulation. Furthermore, the findings are discussed here with reference to existing researches for an in-depth understanding.

### **3. Findings and Discussion:**

#### **3.1 Nature of writing:**

To identify teachers' perception about the nature of writing different areas were explored, including the nature of developing writing skill, practice, and critical thinking. In response to the

statement “writing is more inborn than learned” , 59% teachers strongly disagreed and 24% disagreed , while only 6% perceived writing as an skill that is in born. Likewise almost all the participants either strongly agreed (60%) or agreed (33%) with the view that regular practice is required for the development of writing skill. In addition, 91% teachers strongly agreed with the idea that critical thinking is required for good writing skill. Similar result was found in the individual interview as most of the teachers perceive the same. There responses include,

*“Critical thinking helps students to think actively by following step-by-step process and I think that contributes in improving the writing skill” - A male teacher from Palashbari upazila, Rangpur*

*“I have seen students who obtained forty percent marks in grade six but through regular practice they improved and in Secondary School Certificate examination (after completion of grade ten), they scored eighty percent .....so I think this is not inborn and can be learnt.” – A female teacher from Gangni upazila, Khulna.*

These data suggest that teachers’ in secondary level considered writing as a skill which can be mastered through regular practice and improved critical thinking. This is in line with what previous researchers have suggested. For example, Graham (1997) posited that writing can be learned and students can develop effective writing skill through regular practice (Hedge 2005). Researchers also suggest that critical thinking is a practical and powerful tool (Cranmer, 2000) which is prerequisite for effective writing skill (Yang, 2013).

However, during the classroom observation it was found that 66% respondents were not providing explicit opportunities for planning or brainstorming before the students started writing which showed incongruity with their perception of critical thinking. So, it could be commented that there is a gap between the perceptions of the teachers and their classroom practices regarding nature of writing.

### **3.2 Forms of writing:**

With a view to identify teachers’ perception on forms of writing, statements were set on the importance of grammar, vocabulary, error free writing, etc. Most of the teachers disagreed (47%) or strongly disagreed (39%) with a statement claiming the students should not be allowed to write before they master the grammar and vocabulary. In the same way teachers emphasized on having adequate knowledge of grammar and vocabulary without prioritizing one over another. A male teacher from Sherpur Sadar, Dhaka reflects the same idea during the interview:

*“If the students only know vocabulary they may be able to write but without proper grammatical structure that might not reflect any clear meaning .....so all the skills are essential for effective writing”*

This was also revealed through the responses to the statement that writing is not as important as grammar and vocabulary as 82% of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this. Besides, 84% of the respondents perceived that grammar and vocabulary should not be stressed in the high school level. In addition, 50% teachers stated that it is inappropriate to expect error free writing from the students. The same is found during the interview. For example a female teacher from Naogaon Sadar of Rajshahi division mentioned:

*“As English is not their (students) first language, I allow error in writing. I don't do frequent correction as I think accuracy will be developed gradually if they keep on writing”*

In regards to the same issue, 68% expressed that accuracy can be achieved at a later stage and tolerating error in writing will not create any obstacle for it. On the other hand, most of the teachers disagreed with the statement that that teaching writing can be done in higher level not in secondary.

The findings indicated that the teachers' perception regarding the forms of writing is very progressive and they consider all the skills in teaching writing with an equal importance. Similar view is found in other researches; Graham (1997) emphasized on the importance of learning grammar and vocabulary from the context of students' writing as empirical research showed that traditional grammar exercise is ineffective. In addition, teachers' perception on error is very constructive as they reflected openness in accepting error in writing. Regarding the error correction Ferries (2002) mentioned that it is unrealistic to expect error-free writing in second language. Similarly, Truscott (1996, 1999) argued that error correction has detrimental effect on the students learning and should therefore be abandoned in the classroom.

However, in class observations, the teachers were found to be stressing on the grammatical and vocabulary rather than the writing as a whole. It could be presumed that, this might be happening not due to their perception on teaching writing but because of their failure in translating their perception into practice in the classroom. Though the teachers mentioned that they did not expect error free writing from the students and tolerate error, significant amount of feedback was provided on grammatical error. On the whole, the findings showed that there was hardly any relationship between the teachers' perception and practice.

### 3.3 Approach to Teaching Writing:

Data in relation to teachers' perception of their preferred approach to teaching writing showed that most of the teachers (67%) mention that they prefer to teach writing through process approach while 15% showed their preference for product approach. In this respect one male teacher from Chittagong mentioned in the interview,

*“In my class, I encourage the students to think, plan and draft before they start writing. Besides, I give them freedom to express their ideas freely”*

Similarly, the data reflected the teachers' interest in free writing approach over the controlled writing approach as 76% of the teachers perceived that free writing is more effective for teaching writing. On the contrary, most of the respondents agreed that guided writing was better than free writing approach. From teachers' perception of free writing and guided writing, it is evident that there are conflicts in their perception of the approaches to teach writing.

In comparing the ideal teaching approach between the product and process approach most teachers (89%) preferred the process approach. Research findings suggest writing to be a combination of process and product (Sokolik, 2003) and applying both is effective for the teaching of writing (Khansir, 2012). Other studies suggest that teachers' acknowledge that for process writing they need to follow all the steps of it namely planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Seow,1995).

In the interview and questionnaire teachers clearly reflected their preference for process and free writing. However, that is not what was observed in the classroom. Teachers mentioned that they encouraged students for step-by-step writing and encouraged student for writing on topics outside of the textbook. However, during classroom observation it was seen that they were only focusing on the product rather than the process of writing. The students were not provided with any opportunity for planning and drafting before they start writing. In addition to that most were conducting classes with the selected topics from the textbook which they thought were important for students' examinations.

### 3.4 Feedback in writing:

About feedback in developing writing skills most of the teachers (64%) indicated that peer and teacher feedback plays a facilitative role in developing effective writing skill. They also mentioned that making the students rewrite can help them to improve the quality of writing. A very small number of respondents (1%) think that 'giving comments and corrections on students' written products is difficult and time consuming' while 57% & 24% respectively disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement. Besides, majority of them are in favor of assigning out of

class writing activities and providing opportunity for peer correction on their writing. A statement from a female teacher in Bauphal, Barisal reflects the same thought:

*“Written feedback from teacher is important as that helps students improve their writing skill and peer correction can also be useful at times for the same”*

Earlier researches also show that the teachers perceive feedback as an important tool for developing writing skill. Ferris (2003) stressed on providing feedback. In this research, through the interview it was revealed that teachers are comfortable in providing feedback through error correction, written comments and peer feedback. However, Karim's (2011) research in the Bangladeshi context revealed that teachers considered error correction as the most effective tools. Though, the teachers comprehend the importance of providing feedback in practice sometime that doesn't happen as error correction is a time consuming process (Kubota, 2001) and at the same time an exhausting job (Lee, 2003).

The teachers stressed on correcting students' written work through written comments to help improve their writing and the classroom observations showed that teachers put utmost effort for doing this. However, most of the time due to the large number of students they struggle to translate their perception into practice. In light with their perception and the reality of Bangladeshi classroom it could be expected that they would encourage students for peer feedback and self-correction as an alternative. But during observation, it was found that 60% teachers hardly did so. Moreover, in few cases it was observed that the teachers were checking some students' writing and afterwards asked the rest of the class to copy that. So, it could be commented that correspondence between perception and practice is not strong.

### **3.5 Writing strategy:**

Almost all the teachers (98%) agreed with the statement that portrayed that more focus should be given in teaching writing strategies. The teachers have given a good number of strategies that show their real practice of teaching and learning writing skill. About half of the teachers are very much in favor of teaching writing skill following writing strategies (thinking, planning, writing and checking) while 56% of the teachers are more likely to follow group writing. Further, most of the teachers (63%) want their students to correct their written mistakes with each other and very few of the teachers (5%) disagreed on this matter. In one of the interviews, a male teacher from Sylhet stated that,

*“Group writing and peer corrections are very effective for developing the writing skill of the students in Bangladeshi big classroom as these helps me to engage every students in the class”*

The data reflected that teachers perceive teaching writing strategies essential for quality writing. However, a significant proportion of the respondent stated that brainstorming, drafting, revising were wastage of time which means the process is not required. This contradictory view might suggest that the teachers did not understand the proper meaning of writing strategy. During the classroom observation some (15%) teachers were found explaining what strategy meant rather than engaging them in planning for writing, preparing the first draft or checking their writing. Teachers' effort would only be fruitful if they could structure the activities in different stages (Hedges 2005). Besides, teachers claimed that they encouraged group writing in their classes. But while visiting classrooms it was seen that the students were not writing in groups but writing individually without having any collaborative effort. Therefore, it may be said that teachers did not practice what they preached.

#### **4. Concluding Remarks:**

This study identified a weak connection between the perception and the actual classroom practice regarding teaching writing in the secondary classrooms in Bangladesh. The teachers believe that all four skills should be given equal importance along with the underpinning skills such as grammar and vocabulary; but while teaching writing in the classroom the teachers somehow prioritized the underpinning skills. Thus their struggle was evident and their classroom practices were far from what they perceived. Therefore, the teachers need to provide the students with adequate time and opportunity for frequent practice for developing effective writing skill (Graham & Harris, 1988). William Hazlitt, a writer, recognized this fact and stated that "the more a man writes, the more he can write" (Burnham, 1994, p.114).

Teachers seemed to be strong advocates for process approach of writing but most of them were conducting writing classes on the basis of the product approach. Hasan (2010) indicated the effectiveness of using a combination of both product and process approach depending on the need of the students and genre of the text in the Bangladeshi context. The teachers in the country were well acquainted with the product approach, as that prevailed for a long time. At the same time they wanted to apply process considering the usefulness in developing writing skill. Most of the teachers were finding it difficult to ensure pre-write, while writing and post-writing were employed more effectively. Thus, teachers intended to apply their perceived knowledge in process writing but they lack practical skill in doing it. Therefore, intensive effort is required to contextualize approach of teaching writing to minimize the gap between their perception and classroom practice.

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